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# Review of Working to learn: transforming learning in the workplace

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## **Working to Learn: transforming learning in the workplace**

Evans, K., Hodkinson, P. & Unwin, L.(eds)

London, Kogan Page, 2002

ISBN 0 7494 3685 9, hbk., 246pp.

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This is a timely collection since workplace learning (WPL) or work-based learning (WBL) – the two conceptions are not completely identical though they are often used interchangeably - of one kind or another is currently central to a range of DfES policy initiatives including vocational GCSEs, reconstructed Modern Apprenticeships, Foundation Degrees and the re-organisation of 14-19 education and training. All the papers in *Working to Learn* – though not necessarily always concerned with that form of learning which is the focus of recent policy (since WPL is the main perspective here, whereas WBL is what most mainstream policy initiatives are about) – are written by experienced researchers and practitioners in the field, and all have something of value and interest to contribute to the rapidly-expanding domain of discourse about and development of WPL and WBL theory and practice.

Anyone with a passing acquaintance with the literature in this field will immediately recognise some familiar concepts, sources, themes and issues. Taking a representative sample, there are references to situated cognition (Lave & Wenger), activity theory (Engestrom), curriculum connectivity (Young), communities of practice (Wenger), apprenticeship (Evans & Rainbird), learning careers (Bloomer & Hodkinson), occupational and professional competence (Eraut) and, the old favourite in this field, the knowledge-based economy (everybody!). In the first chapter which links WPL with general lifelong learning policy, Evans & Rainbird make the important point that – in spite of the renewed emphasis on WPL and a host of recent initiatives linked to ‘learning society’ projects – most activity in this sphere is still as ‘front loaded’ as the rest of the education and training system. This central shortcoming – in addition to the findings reported in the recent Learning Society research programme (Coffield,2000) that most workers never experience any form of WPL or training – justifies the conclusion noted in the final chapter by the *Working to Learn* group that the UK system requires ‘a more active role for the state in creating a supportive institutional framework’ (p.235) for WPL in particular and vocational education and training (VET) in general.

Reflecting current fashions in the moveable feast of VET terminology, the book is concerned mainly with learning and skills rather than education, training and knowledge. This is significant since – unlike education and training – learning implies no state/employer institutional support or framework and this, of course, goes to the heart of the critique of the UK's voluntarist system of VET which runs throughout the book. In terms of links between WPL and knowledge, apart from a brief discussion about differences between knowing how, that, who and why (pp.23-5) and an attempt to make sense of the notion of 'knowledge workers' (pp.100-102), there is little sustained examination of the epistemological basis of WPL. It is interesting how attempts to specify the VET components necessary for the 'knowledge-based economy' always end in talk about skills and competences, and not about knowledge at all. In this respect, the work of Hager, Beckett, Symes, et al (Symes & McIntyre,2000; Boud & Solomon,2001) at the University of Technology, Sydney would make interesting supplementary reading.

Bloomer & Hodkinson's updated discussion of learning careers in the context of WPL provides an excellent diagnosis of current system weaknesses, and Young's chapter on qualifications and lifelong learning demonstrates clearly the differences between 'oucomes-based' (UK, Australia, New Zealand) and 'institution-based' (mainly OECD countries) qualifications strategies, as well as showing why the former Anglophone countries are now moving away from outcomes approaches. Eraut also looks at the interaction between WPL and qualifications and Fuller & Unwin look at the pedagogic implications of learning at work. In addition, SMEs (Senker), learning organisations (Ashton) and the constantly changing skills agenda (Felstead, Keep & Payne) are all expertly investigated within the context of WPL perspectives.

This collection of papers provides a host of valuable insights about WPL and makes important recommendations for practice which should be considered by all those in the DfES who currently view the work-based route as a panacea for remedying all the deficiencies of the system. The book leaves two principal areas of concern to be addressed. First, even if all the shortcomings of current WPL practice were removed, there would still be millions of workers – either under-employed or in part-time, insecure and peripheral work (cf Young's comments,pp.56ff) – who will never experience any meaningful learning in, at or through work. Clearly WPL improvements will have no interest or relevance to such people and – as recent

lifelong learning policy initiatives have demonstrated – it is very difficult to accommodate and cater for their needs and interests.

Secondly, although the book is by no means uncritical of vacuous and rhetorical sloganising about the knowledge-based economy and globalisation (and most commentators take care to stress the democratic as well as the dominant technocratic interpretations of lifelong learning) there is a dimension of economic activity which remains relatively untouched by all this discourse about WPL. All the talk about learning organisations and knowledge workers can easily function as a mask to hide all those corrosive ills of the system which are currently being opposed by anti-capitalist movements around the world in the search, as Rikowski (2001,p.41) puts it, for an ‘educational politics of human resistance to the capitalisation of humanity through education and training’ Exploring these darker sides of the contemporary economic scene, McLaren, Hill & Cole (1999,p.203) paint a bleak and depressing picture of the ‘hegemonic market capitalist agenda’ which has:

set in place a brutal abandonment of systems of social protection, longer working hours, reduced welfare benefits, a lessening of resources and freedom of manoeuvre, and a transformation of governments into security forces for multi-national corporations...who relentlessly scour the globe for places where workers can be exploited for cheaper and cheaper labour

WPL offers no way out of such conditions and, indeed, may even be aiding and abetting such exploitative practices (a notion which might have been more fully examined in the trade union contribution to this collection).

Of course it could never have been the remit of *Working to Learn* to think outside of the economic system which provides the *raison d’être* for almost all current forms of WPL and VET. The ‘six challenges for the future’ outlined in the final chapter – a realistic audit of achievements towards the learning society, a critical re-examination of work modernization, the recognition of different needs and interests for employers and employees, an acknowledgement of the complexity of WPL forms and practices, developing a comparative understanding of the policy linkages between WPL and national economic outcomes, and establishing citizenship rights for WPL – are all, to some extent, designed to improve the present economic infrastructure along with its VET superstructure. Each of these challenges is well considered and fully justified by the contributors. Will any of them be met? On past experience, optimistic perspectives would be difficult to envisage.

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